

LISTENING TO DHAMMA

Notes taken during the seminars in Sri Lanka, 1979 and during discussions with Khun Sujin, Bangkok 1979, specifically in the context of listening to Dhamma.

'He who imbibes the (nectar of) the Dhamma, the Truth, lives happily with a serene mind. The wise man ever delights in the Dhamma proclaimed by the noble saints.'

Dhammapada, v.79

Khun Sujin made a comment that 'when one has the right understanding, one doesn't have to think of anything to develop satipatthana, but when one doesn't understand, one needs to meet the right person in order to have right understanding.' The Buddha often talked about the value of the 'Good friend' and of listening to the Teachings as a condition for wisdom to develop. If one does not listen, one will not know that one has wrong understanding of the realities of our life and as Phra Dhammadhara commented, 'if one does not realise yet that one has wrong understanding it is impossible to develop right understanding.... The aim of thinking about concepts in the right way is to know more about realities...'

I asked Khun Sujin how much one needs to hear and she replied that the question shows the desire to get results. 'One doesn't have to hope or wish or think or expect, but one knows it's (hearing the Dhamma) a condition for intellectual understanding.... The disciples followed Lord Buddha just to hear reminders. It's a very important factor.' She also emphasised how by hearing more, saddha arises and develops. 'Even if one understands, one needs to hear more details... saṅkhāra khandha which can form up the developed paññā.' Phra Dhammadhara also pointed out how we keep thinking it's enough listening so we need time and place for the development, but it's never enough listening.'

We need to listen again and again and we need to listen in the right way. Phra Dhammadhara pointed out how 'sometimes we go to hear a discussion and part of it is about something we have already heard or already know, so we do other work in our minds. We are busy thinking about many, many things, but we lose a good opportunity then because when the other is saying those old, familiar things, if we listen to them with right understanding, we can benefit very much. What are we doing when we are reading the other book or doing other things? Just taking our inquisitive attitude from the discussion.... If there is Dhamma being spoken, it must be useful, even if one has heard it before many, many times. It just depends on how one listens to it. If one is looking for something, one will not be interested because one will think one's heard it before.... it's not revealing, it doesn't tell me anything I didn't know before.... Does one know seeing at this moment and lobha at this moment? Sound through the ear door? Probably not, so let such words be fresh every moment, because every moment there is a need to study reality. Every moment we are stale with lobha, dosa, moha.... The citta can be fresh and there can even be some recognising realities while we are discussing Dhamma.' It was also pointed out that 'one has to learn to listen to Dhamma talks because if one just heard one Dhamma talk a year and one really listened, it might be better than one hundred of them where one is out for what one may get out of it today, not really applying oneself to what is being said and not asking oneself important questions about the meaning of it.... Really be thorough and really question the meaning of what one is hearing and not just fitting it into its place in a process of thought that one has built up about what is kusala and what is akusala, that fits, that goes in there... It's the same with reading a Sutta. There is not any Sutta that wouldn't be well worth spending half an hour on one line because if the Buddha says something like, 'one who is hard to talk to or admonish, such a one has anger, is overcome by anger,' one's first reaction might be, it's nothing to do with me, because I may have dosa, but I am not really angry. I am not overcome by anger....'

Phra Dhammadhara continues to ask, 'What is anger? If one wants to know what anger is, one has to realise that the Buddha talks about many degrees of dosa and uses many words. They are not synonyms. It doesn't mean that if he says anger, resentment, he is the suspicious type, that they are all the same. He can be referring to different intensities of dosa or of different objects of dosa or dosa that arises quickly and passes away quickly. Other times (speaking conventionally) it stays. They are different, but has one ever stopped to think about the differences between them. Because one sees that

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word anger and passes over it. So, what is meant by anger? Could it cover more subtle shades of dosa than we thought? We should stop and think, well have I ever been angry in my whole life? What do we mean by anger? What do I mean by anger? When have I been angry? We should think about the simple words we read in the Tipitaka to see what we mean by anger. We can ask people about Dhamma, because there is a wealth of potential help around that we don't draw upon because we have prejudices and we have pride, we have fixed ideas etc. etc.... But this is the real student, the person who is out to find out, who wants to find out more and more and more.... The person who risks people's opinions... May benefit. Listen and understand what he means, because even if he has a wrong idea, if you listen to try and help the man better, you will develop mettā and if one ever wants to help the man, you will be able to help him better because you will have a better idea of how his mind works. If he has a problem, you will understand why he has that idea. So we must learn to understand what it means to be a student, a real student.'

There are many examples in the Teachings of the Buddha of the different ways of listening or studying. In the 'Gradual Sayings' (Book of Tens, Ch. VI, par. 5, Waning) the Buddha talks about the person 'whose nature is to wane' and the person 'whose nature is to wax':

'Now to what extent was a person called 'of a nature to wane' by the Exalted One? Herein, your reverences, a monk listens not to a teaching not heard before, while the teachings he has heard go to confusion; those teachings formerly contacted by thought no longer occur to him, and he understands not what is unintelligible. To this extent was a person called 'one of a nature to wane' by the Exalted One.

And to what extent was a person called 'of a nature to wax'? (Herein the words are applied when just the opposite is the case.)?

In another Sutta in the 'Gradual Sayings' (Book of the Threes, Ch. 111, par. 30, Topsy-turvy), the Buddha refers to three ways of listening to the Dhamma. There is the 'topsy-turvy-brained' person who pays 'no heed to that talk in its beginning, pays no heed to its middle, pays no heed to its ending.' There is the 'scatter-brained' person who 'as he sits he pays heed to that talk in its beginning, its middle and its end, but when he has risen up from his seat he pays no heed thereto...' Thirdly, there is the 'comprehensive brained' person who 'pays heed to that talk.... Also when he rises from his seat he bears it in mind, in its beginning, its middle and its ending.'

Phra Dhammādhara also encouraged us to 'help ourselves also.... Explain to ourselves and listen to ourselves.... Akusala all day, every day... The more we accumulate akusala, the more conditions for all wrong actions. When will we start, when will we get to know realities if we don't begin to listen and to ask the good questions and start to listen a little more carefully than usual?....' On the same subject of reading, listening and asking questions or having Dhamma discussions, it was emphasised on another occasion that 'this moment now, there can, there should be sati... when we look for or want some example, we may be thinking about how we can incorporate information we can get to our understanding instead of just studying this moment that we are asking questions and interested to know more. Sometimes I think it may be rather difficult to have sati at moments of discussing Dhamma even though it's sometimes said it's easier when one is discussing Dhamma.... but it's also possible to be rather forgetful, so busy acquiring information'

What is important is the kusala citta at the moment of listening or participating in a discussion or asking a question. The moment of real listening has to be the moment of kusala citta and this will only be known more clearly, that is which are the moments of kusala and akusala, by the development of satipatthāna and the wisdom which can understand the realities precisely. Phra Dhammādhara asked in the same discussion 'what kinds of citta ask questions?.... Many different kinds.... One can ask questions to even impress the others sometimes, about how much knowledge one has.... Other times there can be very strong, desperate desire to know something, other times the question can be not thought out so well, a lot of moha... One may not even understand one's own question. There are countless different kinds of citta which can arise when one asks questions and perhaps it wouldn't even

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be wrong to say they would be mostly akusala citta when one is asking questions about Dhamma, because our whole life is permeated by not kusala but akusala, so it can come into Dhamma discussion too....

So don't forget to also learn more about the moments of asking questions and listening to replies as well. Sometimes one asks a question and then moha comes running in and one doesn't understand anything of the answer or is very distracted..... There can be mindfulness that it is not self at that moment that one's mind is all scattered, a characteristic of nāma at that moment.... There is not another way.

What is important is the moment of kusala citta when one is not concerned about the other's shortcomings but listens wisely. In the account about Pāthika, the Naked Ascetic (Commentary to the Dhammapada, Bk IV. Flowers, 6), the Naked Ascetic is greatly provoked when the Buddha visits the house of his benefactor. He reviles his benefactor and leaves the house. The Buddha, observing that the mind of his hostess (the same benefactor) is agitated, urges her to pay no attention to the sins of others, but to give heed to her own shortcomings.

The aim of listening or thinking about concepts in the right way is to know more about realities. Right understanding understands that it's not a person or a Buddhist that listens or reads what is useful. Without sati-paṭṭhāna, it can be wanting the best for oneself, clinging to self, always wanting something for self, even wanting more understanding..... It's good to remember that listening in the absolute sense is not a 'situation' and that as Khun Sujin pointed out, 'the Buddha taught us to listen to Dhamma, not people.... As understanding grows, it grows beyond the level of thinking of sammuti sacca and knows the difference between paramatha sacca and sammuti sacca, instead of clinging to sammuti sacca and taking for self....' Often we are not 'just concerned about developing right understanding, but want to be the wise person.'

There can be a lot of clinging to Dhamma friends and often one is more concerned about the person who speaks than appreciating what is said. Phra Dhammadhara pointed this out. 'What about now, here, because at each moment if the citta is not kusala it's akusala. If it's not akusala it's kusala.... Different accumulations at each moment of kusala and akusala. There may be saddhā now, one may get to know it's characteristic better. It's different from just liking what one hears or being attached, for example, with Dhamma friends, one may feel so secure one forgets to develop kusala. It's not saddhā any more, it's attachment. One does hear good things from Dhamma friends, especially Dhamma friends who have more understanding than we have and it's understanding and saddhā when one knows that what one hears is useful, but how much clinging there can be also and how much fear if, say, sometimes we think that person may be wrong about something because we think we may have found some full-proof way.... just sit round this person long enough and everything will be all right. The Buddha always taught us to listen to Dhamma, not people and I remember something about Bhikkhus, for example, because though they may have studied much and even have quite a deep understanding by conditions, they may on some occasion do something quite improper because they are not yet ariya puggala. Then all the so-called saddhā of the lay followers may disappear because he has done something incompatible with the understanding he appears to have. So then they think that maybe everything he says is wrong. No, we must listen to what he says. Maybe he doesn't understand it himself, but it may still be quite correct.'

Most of the time we don't know the characteristic of kusala clearly. Sometimes we may be so concerned about the words or language that is spoken, and not appreciate the value of what is said. Khun Sujin gave the example of a Thai man who is so concerned about the Thai words used for the second precept that he has aversion whenever he hears it, whereas for the others it's the meaning, not the words that matter. We forget that the main purpose is the development of sati-paṭṭhāna. 'Whatever one reads is the urgency of developing sati-paṭṭhāna.' Khun Sujin talked further about the danger of attachment to language and words and how it can prevent 'listening'. 'The Suttas in the Tipitaka will bring more and more benefit when one understands more, appreciates more. When one reads with understanding, not just the words but the realities which these words represent, it's more meaningful and when one understands

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what it means, the characteristics of reality, it's more beautiful than the words, the truth of reality, the nature of reality. What does this word mean? What do those words mean? If one just wants to understand the definition it's not the right attitude of understanding Dhamma. The words are just trying to explain so that one will have real understanding of reality. If these words are not sufficient, one can use any other words to explain realities. This is why the Buddha used many, many words to explain realities.'

Khun Sujin continues to add that 'one has to understand the meaning of reading that word or phrase, not just to be stuck to that word but to understand the reality which that word represents. For example, if one says 'what is citta', if one answers 'consciousness' or 'mind', that is not the meaning of listening to it. The meaning of listening to that word is how can one understand realities which those words represent. When a Thai person asked 'do you have citta', you will say 'yes', but one shouldn't be satisfied with just saying so, one should understand what one means by saying 'yes, I have citta'. It's not only it's definition, but it's meaning that has to be understood. The purpose of language is to represent any meaning or reality so one just shouldn't be stuck by the beauty of grammar or language, but should understand what language is trying to represent. The beauty of language should be the truth of realities which language represents.'

There was also discussion in Sri Lanka about how aversion prevents listening also. There was discussion about the Anumana Sutta in the Middle Length Sayings, which considers various reasons why one may not be able to listen to what is being said or use. These include when one is overcome with anger or when one is very suspicious, when one carries a grudge or takes offence. There are many others which are all reasons why one may not listen in a useful way with kusala citta. Most valuable would be a moment of right understanding of the anger or suspiciousness as they are, conditioned realities beyond control. In the beginning 'sati is slow and awkward' and there are bound to be many moments of listening which are not skilful, but we should not underestimate wisdom and think that these cannot be known. Phra Dhammadhara also reminded us that 'seeing the lack of any alternative is a way of seeing the value of kusala.' Khun Sujin also reminded us that 'one has to be true to oneself and to each moment as it is conditioned' and that it doesn't help to be attached to the moments of kusala and to have aversion to the moments of akusala. 'When sati is developed, one becomes more resigned to the truth.... Satipatthana is indispensable'. In the Dhammapada (v. 65) we are reminded that:

'Even for a moment, if a man of intelligence associates with a wise man, he quickly understands the Truth, as the tongue (perceives) the flavour of soup.'

At the moment of being overcome with aversion, there is no 'man of intelligence! One may have aversion to a particular characteristic in a person. Jill made a comment about how 'they maybe speaking totally correct Dhamma, yet because of something in their character, some mannerism or something, we can't listen. All we have is just aversion. There is no understanding of the Dhamma itself, although it's pure Dhamma. Someone may be saying that seeing is not self at this moment, yet because of some small thing that irritates you about the person, there is no listening at all. I guess the antithesis to what you were saying about if you have attachment to a person....' Phra Dhammadhara comments that 'any defilement will stop you from listening and studying what's said and studying realities....'

I had some further discussion on the subject with Khun Sujin. I asked if she could say something more about appreciating reminders from anyone and I didn't mean when someone has wrong view, but when someone says something and it's right, but we are so influenced by the person who says it that we can't appreciate the value of what's right and useful. Is it just because we cling so much to the idea of there being a person that we are not able to just appreciate the Dhamma or words spoken?

Khun Sujin replied: 'Why does one listen to the Dhamma of the Teachings if it's not just for the understanding? So, when one gets the understanding from any words, speech or teachings, one gets what one wants, that's all.'

I said that it seems that we often have a lot of pride or conceit that sometimes we cannot listen to certain people or we can only listen to someone

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who we are used to thinking is a teacher or something like this.

Khun Sujin pointed out that we learn from the Tipitaka that Sāriputta listened to a novice monk aged seven years old. I asked if the novice was enlightened and Khun Sujin asked if I cared. 'Can it be just anyone who speaks on Dhamma that one can listen to and find out, because what's right and what's wrong? What's useful and what's not useful?' I asked if Sāriputta found it useful even though the novice had less understanding than himself and Khun Sujin answered that 'if it's not useful, he knows it's not useful. It's better than not hearing anything.' I asked what prevents this from happening, because Sāriputta was an arahat, and the reply was 'no conceit, no pride, no attachment, no aversion. When one sees the value of listening, one just wants to listen. It doesn't hurt at all while one is just listening and one can develop one's wisdom by hearing and noticing, considering what's right and what's wrong. That's the way to sharpen one's understanding.'

Khun Sujin added that 'if it's worthwhile, if it does not waste time, one should listen, but if one knows that one better have some understanding from reading or go to see the other person, it's better than just listening to rubbish that's not Dhamma at all.' I said that it often seems hardest to listen to close friends and Khun Sujin said that she didn't think so. 'I don't have such obstacles. I don't mind who the speaker is, close or not close, as long as one can get more understanding or it reminds me of things like that. I just love hearing and listening. Just want to have more.... I can listen to everyone.' I said that was very wonderful, but that for most of us, we don't find it. 'Just listening, it doesn't hurt at all. It develops wisdom by listening.. one way of developing wisdom. That's why I like to hear everyone participating in discussion and I rejoice when all join in.'

I said that I would like to be able to appreciate more what anyone says but that it doesn't always happen because of maybe too much conceit and clinging to self. Khun Sujin asked if it wasn't because of the speech and I said it was only partly but that I was very easily influenced by many factors including the speaker. 'Well, that's very difficult. It's right if one considers the individual speech, whether it's right or not, but it doesn't mean one considers the speaker, whether he's the right one or not the right one to speak. Just consider the speech.'

We also find out that 'The Buddha's teaching is for practice, not just for reading or intellectual understanding.... If one does not realise yet that one has wrong understanding it is impossible to develop right understanding.' Khun Sujin reminded us that it's not just a matter of listening and understanding intellectually, because 'intellectual understanding covers up the truth as there is no awareness at that moment of a characteristic as it appears. Intellectual understanding should be the foundation, but if one thinks that is enough there is no development and it hinders the development of higher understanding because one does not understand there are more levels of higher understanding.... It's possible to have all the intellectual understanding, but no understanding of the practice, like a blind man carrying a torch... Any intellectual understanding cannot be clear.'

We have to learn to be real 'beginners' or 'students'. Phra Dhammadhara pointed out that even if the other has a little wrong view, he may be able to say something useful. 'When one studies more one sees one's abysmal ignorance. ... Is it visible object that is being studied at that moment or is it some mixed up idea of what is seen? One cannot just go on studying in a haphazard manner, hoping everything will be all right. Visible object can be known, seeing can be known. Without seeing, colour cannot appear... We can use the words 'hardness' and 'colour', but still think it is something.' Phra Dhammadhara also referred to the 'honesty of the beginner who knows he doesn't know anything yet'. Another time he emphasised the value of studying what's said and studying realities. 'Study the meaning of what's said.... Because many times the Buddha talked about the value of study and remembering what's said. For monks reciting and committing to memory, because one doesn't always have a book with one.... Can one remember anything of what the Buddha says except that seeing is not self? ... So reading, studying, committing things to memory, hearing them in mind.... Applying the meaning to one's life..'

The Buddha knew how really hard it was for people to really listen to the teachings. We read in the Gradual Sayings (Book of the Threes, 32, Free of Ego-illusion) that the Buddha spoke to Sāriputta:

'O Sāriputta, whether I teach the Dhamma in brief or whether I teach it at length, or whether I teach it both briefly and at length, those who understand are hard to find.'

'Then, O Blessed One, there is now the time for it! Now, O Sublime Master, is the time for the Blessed One to teach Dhamma in brief, to teach it at length and to teach it both briefly and at length! There will be those who will understand the Dhamma!'

'Well then, Sāriputta, thus should training be done: "Concerning this body with its consciousness, there shall be no conceited imaginings of 'I' and 'Mine' and no such bias. Nor should there be such conceited imagining and bias of 'Mine' with regard to any external objects. We shall thus abide in the attainment of the heart's liberation and the liberation by wisdom, that, while we so abide, there will not be for us any conceited imagining nor bias of 'I' and 'Mine'." That is how the training should be done.'

'In so far, O Sāriputta, as the monk has no such conceited imaginings nor bias of 'I' and 'Mine' concerning this body with consciousness and with regard to any external objects; and in so far as he thus abides in the attainment of the heart's liberation and of the liberation by wisdom - he is then called 'One who has cut off craving and has removed the fetters; one who by the full comprehension (and abandonment) of conceited imaginings, has made an end of suffering.'

We should be encouraged to appreciate the opportunities to consider and listen, with mindfulness, to the teachings and not despair when we find that wisdom has to grow gradually. As Khun Sujin reminded us 'it begins with detachment from the very beginning' and there has to be 'right beginning' now. What other time is there to consider and 'listen' and be aware of realities? We need 'healthy shocks' again and again and as is pointed out in the Dhammapada (v. 76):

'If one sees a wise man, who, like a revealer of treasure, points out faults and rebukes, one should associate with such a person. One will fare well and not ill in the company of such a person.'
